

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Commencement Address

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President of Hunter College of
City University of New York

St. John Arena

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Mr. President, members of the Board of Trustees, members of the faculty, most important--graduates, and just a little less important--mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, children, aunts and uncles and all of the rest of you who are here to celebrate with the men and women in black:

It is particularly good for a midwestern farm girl to come home to the Midwest from the madding crowd and the economic and political madness that is now the life of New York City in this moment of trauma, in this moment of decision for that city, for that state, for this nation and I think for the world community.

It is good to come home to the Midwest, to participate in what I have always believed is essentially a family affair--a commencement, an event which is something between what some of us would recognize as a thrasher's picnic or a union hall meeting or a great, great happening from the '50's and the '60's. It is an intellectual happening of course, but it is

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full of emotion, full of giddiness, full of the lovely symbols of blood, sweat and tears (in white tape on one hat back there). All of that, it seems to me, is appropriate to the elegance of this particular occasion.

We are celebrating many things that are part and parcel of a family. We are celebrating responsibility and accountability on the part of you, the graduates--responsibility for your own education, for making it through the intellectual boot camp training that is part of a university education at any level; accountability to the standards set by faculty, parameters that are only the springboard to doing more with your own intellectual and political and social imaginations and commitment in the future.

We are celebrating the support structures afforded by that other group that I mentioned earlier, the fathers and mothers, the grandfathers and grandmothers, the aunts and the uncles, the wives and husbands, the children who have supported you economically and emotionally, who have brought you to this point and made it possible by allowing you to be dependent so that you could gain the kind of independence that makes you capable of going out to assume the responsibilities for many others in the future.

I want to talk to you today, very briefly, about two sets of dilemmas. One is the dilemma of identity and independence coupled with a necessary interdependence of our lives. The other is the dilemma of smallness and bigness. Let me speak first to the dilemma of smallness and bigness.

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The dilemma of smallness, it seems to me, is reflected and epitomized in our nuclear, our limited personal families. The family has all of the richness of intimacy, the marvelous richness of a one-to-one relationship, the marvelous richness of being seen as more important than anyone else by someone. But that intimacy has also a clear and present danger that is apparent in the best of families when mothering becomes smothering and when fathering becomes a kind of an obsessive patriarchy. The father and the mother who once carried these young graduates in their arms, who had to protect them from the oncoming car will never be able to free from the image of their minds, the little child that they had to rescue. While we chafe at such paternalism and maternalism at times and while we call out against it at times, we depend on it. We depend on it in the depths of our psyches as a concern, as a conviction that there is someone somewhere who believes that we are more important than anyone else in the world. I am wrestling with these dilemmas today as a woman about to be fifty, as a woman who is the product of such an intimate family, and as a woman who took on mothering after she was forty, with an adoptive family of a widowed husband, and who is now celebrating in her forty-ninth year the glory of being a grandmother of an eight-month-old one to whom I will go home tonight for Thanksgiving at grandma's house. I am celebrating these dilemmas today recognizing that my father and mother will never be able to shake that image of me away, and that I am just beginning, even as a grandmother,

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to know in my heart and soul as well as in my mind what it's going to be to try to rescue my dining room table from Joshua pulling off the Thanksgiving table cloth. But Joshua--Joshua one day will sit in this kind of group when I am a much older lady, and I will have to call on all of my intellectual conviction to believe all of the speeches I have ever given--that I am here to make him independent of me and that his mother and father are there to make him independent of them. That is the dilemma that we all live with, the dilemma of creating an atmosphere in which someone who is crucially, emotionally, intellectually important to us must be loved into freedom--freedom to disagree with us, freedom to distrust us at times but in the end, freedom to reverence, precisely because we recognize as older adults that we can disagree. That kind of freedom you have to earn from these, your faculty mentors, the mentors who have brought you on, who have challenged you, whose authority you must take seriously because they are specialists, but the mentors whom you must also question with skepticism and reverence. You will never need to dethrone them or throw them off of a pedestal if you never really put them there, if you have come to realize that each person you will ever deal with is a limited human being, capable of giving you support, capable of giving you understanding but always limited in his ability as indeed you will be limited in yours.

The human family with its elegance and with its limit-
edness ought to be a showcase and a kind of novitiate for

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each of us to learn how to deal with a world community.

And then we take a quantum leap. We take a quantum leap into the bigness that I think is epitomized by The Ohio State University--the bigness that in earlier years was called by students at Berkeley, in the '50's, the world of 'don't bend, fold or spindle.' You have stood in lines to register, lines to pay your dues, lines to get grades, and finally--the critical irony--the line to come in in a graduation procession. When we live in crowds, we must find focus somewhere. The emotional pitch and the feeling of solidarity in the Ohio State stadium or in the Rose Bowl is a beginning, perhaps, but it is not enough.

The dilemma of bigness I am here to live with. I administer one of the all but hopeless bureaucracies in this country, and there is no way to feel and know bureaucracy until you know New York bureaucracy. But I am here to say that I will live and try to help personify that bureaucracy because I believe in the human family. And I believe that those of us, many of us, who grew up in this great Midwest perhaps have a sophistication to bring back to the East Coast about the personalization of bigness that the East Coast has yet to learn. Let me speak to that for just a few minutes.

The East Coast grew up in a hierarchical world. Education in the East Coast was private and hierarchical. It was indeed the Ivy League; it was the world of the privileged, the privileged of the mind and the privileged of the

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profession, and the privileged of families who could "open" the admissions standards even at Harvard. Only the City of New York in founding CCNY and Hunter College in the last century opened itself to the broader-gauged people. And in my judgment, my adoptive New York City earned for all of us the integrity of the Statue of Liberty. It earned through the strategems like CCNY and Hunter the integrity and the honesty of the 'give me your tired and your poor.' And I would imagine that there are many of you in this audience who, like my people, came through the portals of Boston or New York from whatever land your people came, and made the westward movement. As we made the westward movement, we brought the elegance of the whole people. As our people came West, in their little hamlets, in thrashing gangs and union halls, in the small towns where the schools embraced the children of millionaires, of doctors, of farmers, and of shoe repairmen, they understood that the offerings of the family had to be opened to all. The great universities at Michigan, Illinois and Ohio State were founded in what I believe must be the new dignity of distributive justice and distributive elegance.

If we believe that that elegance is hierarchical, that the clear challenge is for Horatio or Hortense Alger to make it to the White House or to the life of the nuclear physicist, then we are consigning, in my judgment, 95 to 90 percent of the people to failure. The Midwest at its best never really believed that. I challenge you as the latest

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graduates of this great university never to forget from where you came. I challenge you to recognize that the elegance of your roots is as important as any other elegance that will be an added-value item to those roots, and that the best and the brightest have to be persons who believe in the elegance of the whole people.

One of my sisters teaches remedial reading in a mill town in Indiana, the other who is nearing 60 is an intensive care nurse in a hospital in California. The world needs hundreds of them for one of me. I am not deprecating myself, but I am trying to get across something that I believe intellectually, rationally and passionately. The world needs us all. Only if we respect the dignity of the waiter and the filling station attendant do we have any right to respect ourselves as humanists, studying the humanities, or as scientists, trying to play a critical and responsible role in a humanistic world. If an academic, intellectual community does not recognize and understand this, it is not a humanistic community. You must be intellectual if you are to be yourself. You have been prepared and trained to bring a honed intellect to professional and social problems. But if we consider ourselves to be the best and the brightest, who are either benevolently or malevolently going to save the rest of the people from themselves, we will not succeed.

We never find our personal identity until we are taken seriously. We never find our personal identity

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until we are both free, independent, and needed. Once one is needed, once one has to be the father or the father figure, the mother or the mother figure, once one has to give up what he or she wishes to do because someone else needs him more, one is already in a position of creative compromise. But I would argue that existential freedom, pure existential freedom, is Hell. Pure existential freedom of doing my thing at any moment, at any time and for any capricious reason, whether it is in scholarly endeavor in the human family, in politics or in business, is Hell, because Hell is loneliness. It is the Hell of no kind of spiritual, intellectual communio with anyone else. The tension of freedom and interdependence is worth the continuing struggle.

Let me speak for a moment specifically to my sisters in the audience, the only "majority minority" in the world, to those of us who are feeling our way. I deliberately say feeling as well as thinking our way--through the tensions of becoming free, of becoming persons, of having others take us seriously. I would argue: have great courage and have a great sense of humor about everyone else and about yourselves. I love to tell women around me, who then tell men around me, including my husband, that I am first and foremost a teacher, and the principle of pedagogy that has never been challenged is that you take people where they are. Now let us face the fact that the men of the world are retarded students about women.

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Let us not unilaterally blame them for that. Let us realize that the men of this world, anthropologically through the decades of their lives and through the anthropological centuries, have always seen women as part of their trusteeship, that the best of them have had a patriarchal feeling about women. That "education" is not undone in a hurry, and if it is undone in a hurry, I would challenge you on the personal level that it may well leave a kind of abortive situation in which there is no warmth. So I say to the men, be a little patient with yourselves, and I say to the young women, be awfully patient with yourselves and with them. Don't be a patsy; for God's sake don't be a doormat; stand up for your rights but stand up for your rights with courage and a dogged sense of humor.

If the master can make you cynical, you are the loser. If anybody can reduce you to a state, not a moment, of cynicism, you have already approached, if not Hell, purgatory, the antechamber, because you have approached a particular kind of loneliness. Cynicism is a clear and present danger always for anybody who is ambitious, ambitious to be a person, ambitious to be a public servant. One is perhaps most insulted when one is not taken seriously. And the greatest insult for any minority, and particularly for the "majority of minority" called women, is patronization, because patronization is a condition of adolescence.

This is the note on which I wish to conclude. The key to real interdependence is mutuality. The key to being

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interdependent is to achieve integration not assimilation. Integration is possible, mutuality is possible, only if the two partners whether they be persons or states or races or sexes, are taken mutually seriously. It will never be fifty-fifty. In the marvelous kind of pornographic and other than pornographic sexual literature, the great debate seems to be who's on top. It seems clear that the position ought to alternate if not fifty-fifty at least ten-ninety. And if you've been achieving ten-ninety it might become twelve-eighty-eight.

I believe that the world community is slowly and painfully moving toward this new learning environment. Only if we understand our terrible interdependence, have we got a chance. Only if we accept in some ways the social welfare state of support provided for you by the State of Ohio and your mothers and fathers and your wives and husbands, only if we understand that but also understand accountability and independence, do we have a chance.

New York City is on its knees, groveling on the ground today, waiting for Gerald Ford. New York City is there because it made a lot of mistakes, but New York City is also there because it was like every one of you in this audience, every one of you who created for these graduates the social welfare state that I am providing for mine and for my grandchildren--the opportunity to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, not on bare feet but on elevator shoes, the opportunity that gave to each one of these young people the

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chance to make it and then the accountability to hang in there for themselves and for others.

You understand profoundly what it is to hang in there with intimacy and to stand by the people in your family. We must learn that with and for the world community.

Ironically, I believe we have learned it "best" in supporting as a nation our defense establishment.

I would argue in closing for your thought and perhaps for your nightmares when you wake up, that the most clear evidence that we have become a social welfare state is our Defense Department. We have been convinced by Bill Buckley and Ronald Reagan that we are all in it together. We have been convinced as a nation that the safety of the person in Columbus, Ohio, is the same as the safety of the person in Little Rock, Arkansas, is the same as the safety of the person in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and in the hills of Appalachia and in New York City. And so we tax ourselves to the hilt in the biggest cooperative insurance policy the world has ever known. I am not totally against it because I am not a total pacifist. (Because I know the ravages of Nazi Germany, I cannot be a total pacifist.) Realizing as a nation that we are all in it together, we have built a big government and a bigger Pentagon than I think we need. But I would argue that we must face up to and analyze this form of big government. Those who call themselves the disciples of small government have got to explain how they have reserved judgment on the Defense

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Department, while they demand a pure laissez-faire activity on health, welfare and education.

Ohio, bless you, has decided to build a great university, a great university that happens to go to the Rose Bowl--and for God's sake don't be ashamed of it--but a great university that will be good because of and also in spite of the Rose Bowl if somebody out there is a leading force in government some day, if somebody out there is a Rhodes' Scholar some day, if somebody out there is an intensive care nurse some day, if all of you out there, are loving, supportive grandfathers and grandmothers some day--loving intimately your human family and voting the taxes for the greatest cooperative the world has ever seen to insure for the children of tomorrow health, education and welfare together with ambition and responsibility.

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